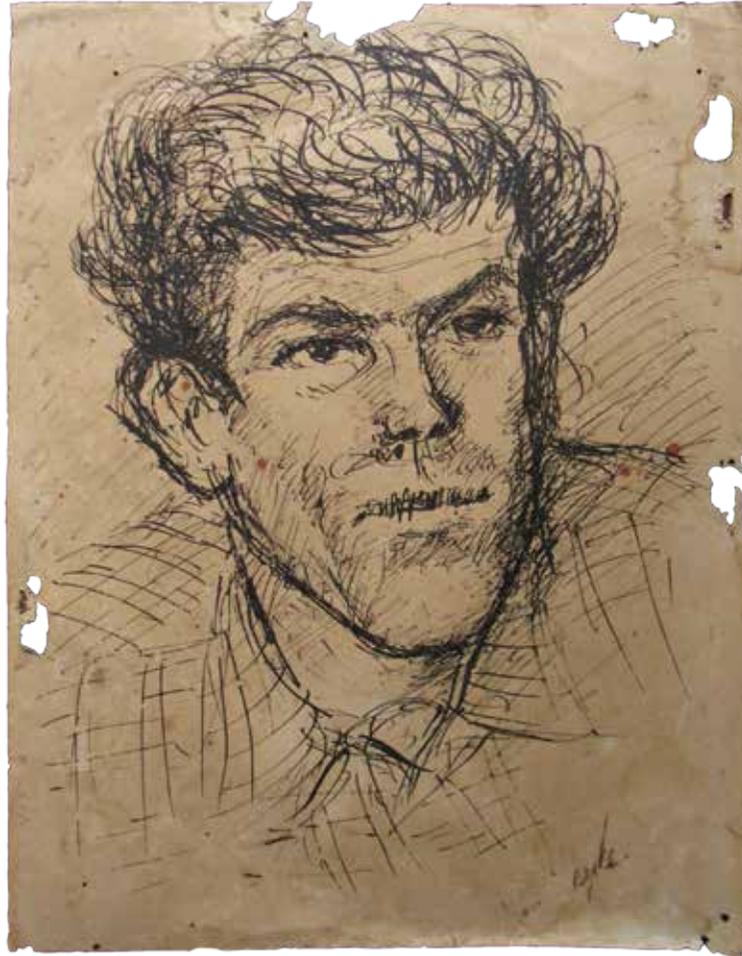


RAYMOND MOULT-SPIERS

PART 2 : THE POSTMASTER WHO WOULD BE PAINTER

Julie Lenora Parsons



Portrait of Raymond; by Kyle (surname unknown), ink on paper, 25x30cm, c 1948. Private Collection

Raymond Moultspiers and his creative world arrived on Stradbroke Island in Queensland in the early 1970s. It arrived in bits and pieces, slowly building to the crescendo called his studio. In much the same way as a painting, so his studio on the island was made, layer upon layer.

At first he treated his Stradbroke Island life as a getaway, an escape to a shack in a fishing village. But gradually he and his red London double decker bus disappeared into the bamboo, possessed by the surrounding swamp and its creatures.

Unknown to Queenslanders, the sarong-clad island recluse who drove big old American cars, had arrived after two decades participating in the vibrant

Sydney art scene. However Queensland remained oblivious to this treasure.

In spite of his NSW press coverage slowing down, work in his new Stradbroke Island studio did not. At this time Raymond Moultspiers' passion for collage had started to develop.

His studio began to fill with all kinds of found objects. Creating collages was not a scissors, glue and magazine cutting experience for him. He would embed all manner of things directly into thick house paint applied to miscellaneous surfaces. These works spoke to him in a language he understood. His opportunistic POW days proved invaluable in the manufacture of this new work.

In the last issue of OZ ARTS we learned of artist Raymond Moul-Spiers' youth and wartime experience. In the second of three parts, we now learn about his successes in the vibrant Sydney art scene of the 40s and 50s and his move to Queensland..

Moul-Spiers in Sydney 1946-1956

Raymond Moul-Spiers had made it back to Australia after his terrible WW2 ordeal as jungle fighter and POW in Changi and then on the Burma Railway. He was finally safe and was focused on making up for those interlocking five war years.

Immediately after his discharge from military hospital in July 1946, he married Elma Gibson, perhaps best

described as an older woman of depth. They lived at the Railway Hotel in Fairfield while he attempted work as a travelling stationery salesman. But nothing could disguise his real passion. He was a painter who was about to enter the Sydney art scene and with gusto.

Within months he had exhibited his war paintings in a solo show, assisted by the Australian Red Cross. In the same year he exhibited his new semi-abstracts with the Contemporary Art Society and began to be 'mentioned in dispatches', sharing reviews in the Sydney papers with contemporaries such as Arthur Boyd.

The following year Ray enrolled as an art student at East Sydney Technical College as part of the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme,

devised for returned soldiers and operating from 1947 to 1949. His enthusiasm and appreciation of the arts extended into the community also and in 1950 he became a foundation member of The City of Parramatta Art Society, still in existence today.

By this time, Ray had resigned his position as a stationery salesman and had hit upon the notion of keeping a small pig farm. But the arty Moul-Spiers and his version of 'Animal Farm' failed, and he applied for and was appointed Deputy Post Master at the makeshift Horsley Park Post Office.

The post office was part of a peculiar arrangement in a house on Horsley Drive, which bizarrely did not face the



Top: Raymond Moul-Spiers, Rainmaker; collage of mixed materials on board, 60x50cm, 1980. The collage is inspired by a story of ritual in which aboriginal women throw crystals and feathers into the air to bring the rains. Moul-Spiers threw smashed windscreen glass and duster feathers into the air allowing them to land spontaneously in thick wet house paint. Other objects were arranged for good measure. Private Collection

Left: Raymond Moul-Spiers, Collage; mixed materials on board, 75x55cm approx., c. 1975. Collages began as he made his way along his crazy and sometimes shattered life path. Perhaps he was attempting to piece it all together. His creative acts on random assorted surfaces mapped progress. Private Collection



Raymond Moul-Spiers in a shiny shark skin suit, photographed c. 1973, chatting with the then Prime Minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam, who was to open the art exhibition in which Raymond was showing. Raymond arrived at the gallery in a 1950s Buick, a big old American luxury car. Curiously his association with Whitlam occurred again in 1988, when he was invited on board Whitlam's boat on Sydney harbour (this time sporting crocodile skin boots). The third person in the photograph is unknown. Private Collection

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road but was entered through a side door. The house was divided into the post office, a little store for Elma to run, their kitchen and bedroom and a massive studio at the back of the house for Ray. It sat on three acres and faced a sly grog shop next door. In a compound between the two premises Moults-Spiers kept a gaggle of geese to alert them to potential customers—or other visitors.

The 1950s Horsley Park Studio (Below)

Hanging from a hook on the railway sleeper mantel a dusty well-worn digger's slouch hat. A now silent rifle leans up against the stonework, colliding with a shirt caught on the top corner of a set of dark wood bookshelves. A pair of gumboots stands stiffly to attention in the centre of the space.

Tacked onto the back of the Horsley Park Post Office the primitive studio was like entering Aladdin's cave.

Four by twos provided rudimentary shelving onto which were placed what appeared to be hundreds of small paintings. The effect was to fill the space, making it sing with colour.

A large timber rack stacked with the bigger canvases ran down the centre. The stench of turpentine prevailed in spite of being mixed with various oils, both studio and artist heady with the

intoxicating world of painting. The allure reeled in many a fine mind.

At art school Moults-Spiers appeared to be adept at expressing himself and challenged belief systems behind some of the art school's expectations. He wrote that an art teacher once described his work as 'flotsam and jetsam', but added 'you find unusual and beautiful things where you least expect'. Ray was an individualist and nothing was going to change how he expressed himself. His sharp mind and curiosity seemed to prevent him remaining too long in one arena.

Prior to Moults-Spiers' arrival, from the late 1930s the Sydney visual artists had begun to explore abstract expressionism and it was this which set Sydney artists apart from their Melbourne counterparts. Surrealism too was tentatively making its way in both Sydney and Melbourne. This was apparent from a series of exhibitions in both cities although the old guard was still clinging to defining Australia through landscape and national identity through portraiture. They imposed their views and rules on the nation's notion of how art should look. *The Contemporary Art Society* (of Australia) challenged the old guard with vehemence but it wasn't long before various

new creative expressions within the *Contemporary Art Society* itself were separating and weakening the Society's hold on the ground they had gained. Broadly, Melbourne's arm focused on Surrealism while Sydney went the way of Abstract Expressionism. Unlike Europe with its rich history, Australia lacked an understanding of a context for modern art. Australian museums and art institutions did not as yet have large collections to draw on and certainly no budgets to bring out touring shows.

With only the Impressionism of the Heidelberg School amidst traditional landscapes and portraiture to look at, it is unsurprising that Australia was slow to embrace what Raymond Moults-Spiers and his contemporaries had to offer.

In 1953 Raymond Moults-Spiers' enthusiasm for the arts, his wartime resilience and his painting talent were



Moults-Spiers' Horsley Park studio in the 1950s. Photographer unknown. Private Collection

proved with a startling solo exhibition at the prominent David Jones Art Gallery.

Sydney Morning Herald NSW, 15 July 1953, p.2:
Raymond Moul Spiers is showing some of his fantasias. Indeed, there is a certain proximity to Walt Disney's creations of a more fanciful type. "Musical Phantasy," "Ballet Musical," "Dreaming of Olwyn," "Hurricane," and "Rebirth" are pretty and ephemeral in a manner which may make them acceptable to film audiences; as paintings they lack that element of the concrete which even the strangest forms must attain here. The exhibition will be opened by Brigadier F. G. Galleghan at 3 pm today. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-title35>

The David Jones Art Gallery was a venue of great importance in Sydney at the time. It had shown the first abstract expressionist group's work in 1939. That show, which demonstrated the principles of constructivism and cubism was called EXHIBITION I, and was set to challenge the predominantly Surrealist modern art group in Melbourne.

Although both the Victorian and NSW modernist groups had come together to form the Contemporary Art Society of Australia in order to face down the traditionalists, the Sydney artists were affiliated



Above: Raymond Moul-Spiers, *Storm* (Surrealist Scene), oil on board, 54x66cm, c1980. Whereabouts unknown

Below: Ray Moul-Spiers, *Hurricane*, oil on board, 48x40 cm, c 1950. A fantasia painting from his 1953 Sydney solo exhibition at David Jones Gallery, which eventually linked Moul-Spiers to Walt Disney (although 'The Wonderful World of Disney' did not introduce its 'Fantasyland' until the following year 1954/55). Whereabouts unknown.



more with Abstract Expressionism and disliked the dominance of Surrealism in the Melbourne group. Not so the rebellious Moults-Spiers: his work embraced both styles.

It is reasonable to conject that Ray Moults-Spiers knew or came into contact with many prominent artists in Sydney. Prior to this period Grace Crowley and her pupil Ralph Balson were among the artists who were inspiring the avant garde in Sydney. Crowley, who had studied art in Europe, was considered the most experienced modernist painter in Sydney. A force of nature and an inspiration to aspiring female artists, she had co-run an art school and later an art studio in George Street, where The City of Parramatta Art Society opened their doors in 1950 with Moults-Spiers as a foundation member.

During Moults-Spiers' time in Sydney, Ralph Balson (Crowley's pupil), was teaching part-time at East Sydney Technical College (1949-59), and it is likely a keen Moults-Spiers would have rubbed shoulders, if not with Balson, then with Balson's ideas via his students. As a student at East Sydney Technical College under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, Moults-Spiers would have encountered Jon Molvig, Robert Klippel, Tom Bass, Tony Tuckson and John Coburn, all of them enrolled under the same scheme and destined to become some of Australia's great artists. Artist/teachers at the time were Godfrey Miller, Wallace Thornton, Dorothy Thornhill and Douglas Dundas. The ex-service people followed in the path of artists like Margaret Olley who had also trained at the College, graduating a top student in 1945; but this group of ex-service people were especially renowned for their dynamism—they were making up for lost time.

In 1951 Gerald and Margo Lewers, who were innovators in the understanding and promotion of non-representational artwork in Sydney, moved to Emu Plains, a 20-minute drive from Moults-Spiers in Horsley Park. Gerald Lewers, a founder of the *Contemporary Art Society* in Sydney, was one of eight artists who participated in EXHIBITION I. By 1955 the *Contemporary Art Society* (sometimes with Moults-Spiers), had held three major shows at David Jones Gallery. The Lewers were on a mission to promote the arts as a powerful device which could be used to overcome contentious nationalism and the devastation of the World Wars. They were accepting of every

form of creativity and artistic freedom, all of which was very appealing to Moults-Spiers.

During the 1950s the Sydney arts community was small, with everyone amongst the visual artists, architects, writers, poets, journalists and musicians aware of each other and, despite the distance, many travelled to Emu Plains to visit Margo and Gerald Lewers. It is possible that some may also have stopped over at Moults-Spiers' studio and that Moults-Spiers travelled to Emu Plains.

The World Wars had a way of challenging belief systems (in the midst of collapse), while the arts had a way of expressing both what had and was happening, along with what was to come. Raymond Moults-Spiers, like other freedom loving Abstract Expressionists, redefined the boundaries of what art could be. Sometimes it was irreverent and perhaps even irrelevant, but his work must have startled in its day as it was often referred to in Sydney newspapers with awkward reviews like:

'R. Moults-Spiers' Post Atom is vital with thought, Surrealism in conception and yet worthy of reason.' Other things were also going on in Moults-Spiers' work. In a review of the 1946 solo exhibition with the Australian Red Cross, his wartime pictures were surprisingly described as being futuristic. The reviewer states they tell of search light advertising, and of Raymond's prediction of the partial surrender of the human personality to a socialistic process along with a change in the status of women, ultimately liberating them. The reviewer concludes 'many of the works are not so much a technically skilled capture, but a capture never-the-less. It is a capture of the mind of the artist as prisoner in the midst of suffering and suspense.'

In 1953, a full colour double-page spread in the February edition of the popular Australian magazine called A.M., written by the acclaimed writer, Herbert Hull, describes Moults-Spiers' POW struggles to procure materials and goes on to imply that Moults-Spiers attracted other former POW artists to join The City of Parramatta Art Society.

Raymond Moults-Spiers' dexterity was evident with his paintings of realistic landscapes along with more contemporary abstract and surrealist works. His fervour and commitment to his practice earned him respect and support, but it appears the conservatives in The City of Parramatta Art Society were often

perplexed by his unusual approach. 'Fantasy' was the term coined and gradually the idea of working for Walt Disney arrived in Ray Moults-Spiers' pigeon hole.

Fantasy lends itself to Surrealism, not Abstract Expressionism, and as Moults-Spiers was dabbling in both, confusion followed about exactly what he was doing. But Sydney was not without its purist Surrealism adversaries. Sydney born surrealist James Cant, who was in London prior to the war and at the time of the explosion of International Surrealism, touched down in Sydney in 1955. Although he later went to live in Adelaide, it was during his brief time in Sydney that he no doubt rubbed shoulders with the tentatively declared Surrealist Moults-Spiers. There are some distinctive similarities in their approaches, although it is safe to say James Cant was a beacon for Moults-Spiers, not the other way around. Cant painted with a different kind of conviction. While in London prior to the war; James Cant had been introduced to the Mayor Gallery, where he first showed in the 1935 group exhibition along with the great Surrealists of Europe - Ernst, Klee and De Chirico- and where he was subsequently invited to become a member of the London Surrealist Group.



Above: Ray Moults-Spiers: *In the Beginning*, oil on board, 49.5x60cm, 1954. Whereabouts unknown
Below: Raymond Moults-Spiers, *Dawn*, 1950s





Raymond Moultspiers, *Mystery Bay* 1953

In 1953, an authentic show called French Painting Today was arranged between the French and Australian Governments to tour Australia. The exhibition arrived in Sydney and laid the ground for aspiring abstractionists to dig in and stand firm against the figurative Surrealist artists of Melbourne, engendering the split in The Contemporary Art Society. But survivalist Moultspiers, ever the chameleon, was able to extend himself to both schools of thought and even on occasion pleased the old guard.

Raymond's solo show of 52 paintings in July 1953 was reviewed by the renowned art critic and author, James Gleeson. Gleeson described Moultspiers' work as 'watercolour fantasies', saying: 'Unfortunately his technical resources are not strong enough to sustain his flights of imagination and the result is confusing to say the least. Greater discipline is needed if these images are ever to become decipherable.' Gleeson had said much the same thing about the founder of NSW's Contemporary Art Society, Gerald Lewers, in his two person show with wife Margo Lewers, the year before.

In 1954 Moultspiers participated in the fourth Annual Exhibition of the City of Parramatta Art Society. One reviewer observed that while the show was full of predominantly conventional styles, this was not the case with the works by Raymond Moultspiers. The reviewer noted that 'his pictures must hold some attraction' adding: 'Despite his Surrealistic treatment of his subjects, Moultspiers' use of brilliant blues on both canvasses creates a bright interesting impression.' Another review of the following 1955 Annual Parramatta Art Show written by art critic Muriel Staunton, further singles out Moultspiers. 'Moultspiers once again draws attention and causes the conservative to realise that this painter is unique. His 'Summertime', primitive in conception, is powerfully mystic.'

Extraordinary as it sounds, the spirited Raymond decided to take on the world of Walt Disney. Raymond sent Walt Disney a letter and the newspaper cuttings citing the reviews of his work in reference to Walt Disney's fantasy world. This courageous act of self-confidence actually succeeded and he received an offer of a paid job trial. In

January 1956 he left his position as Deputy Post Master at Horsley Park and with music playing and streamers flying he and his wife Elma boarded an ocean liner and set sail for Hollywood.

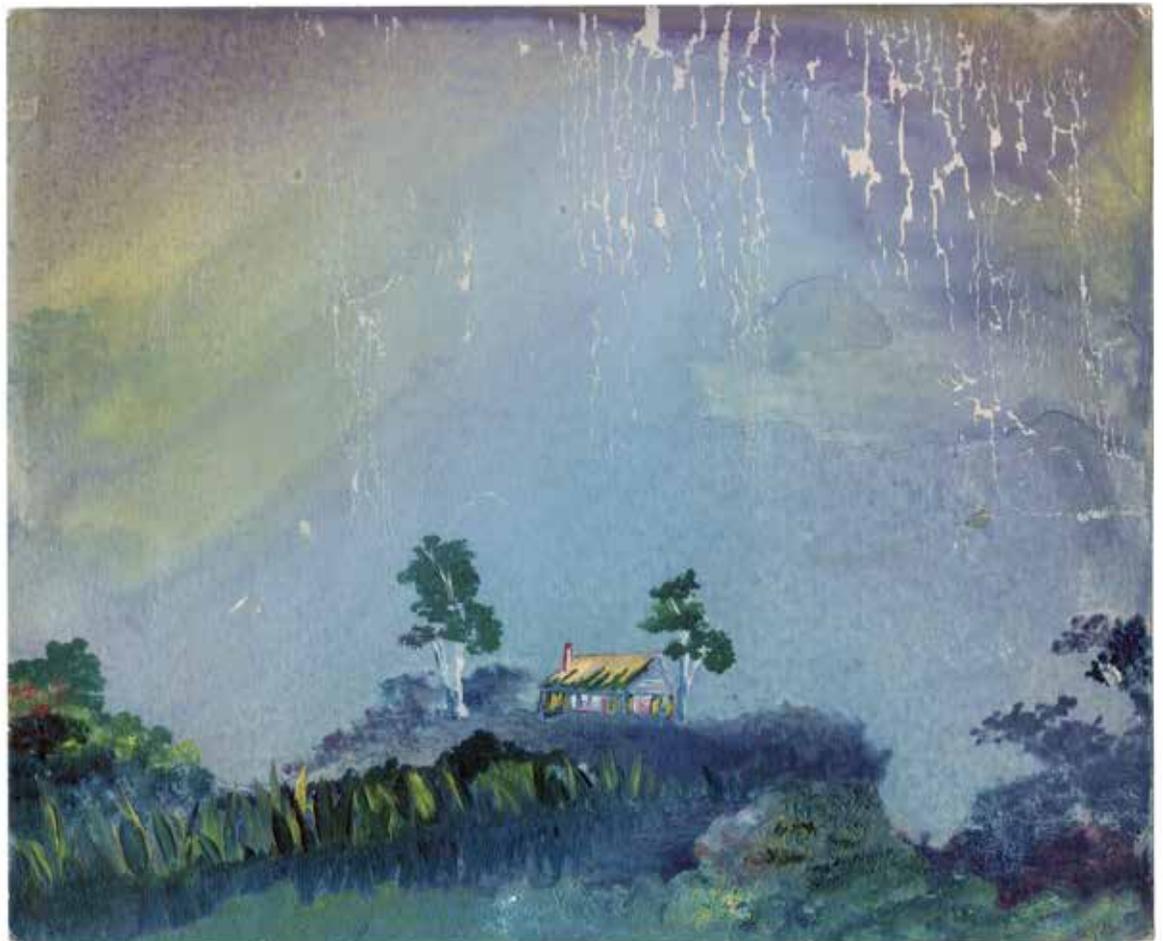
He worked there, as an artist, albeit temporarily. Perhaps Raymond's artistically expressive temperament conflicted with Disney's. Disney was in any case notoriously difficult to work for.

However, further problems arose when Elma was unable to secure a visa to stay in America and returned home in August 1956. Ray left the Disney Studios and took a job at a Hollywood ranch breaking in horses for film work. There his likeness to actor Lee Marvin was noticed and he began to consider work as a Marvin stand-in, but before any of this could eventuate Ray decided to follow Elma and was back in Australia for Christmas that same year.



Above: Raymond Moultspiers, *Australian Landscape*, 1957

Below: Raymond Moultspiers, *Hut on the Hill*, 1955





Raymond Moultspiers, *Totem in Surrealistic Landscape*, 1956

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**Part 3 will be published in
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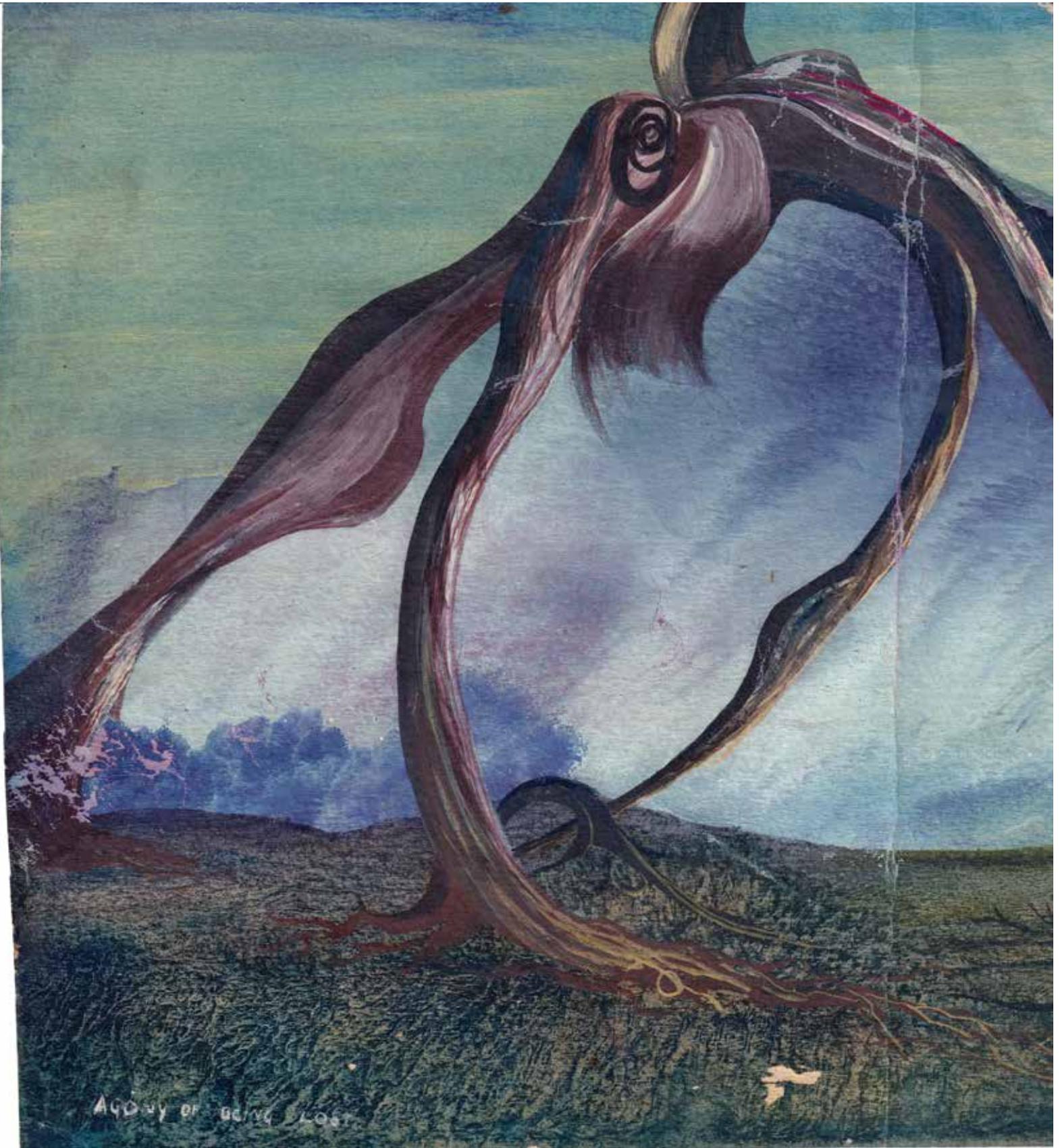
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